

MCNEAL & BLACK TANNERY
(Elk Tanning Company)
(Exact Level Company)
N side of Main Street, S of SR 96
Manns Choice
Bedford County
Pennsylvania

HAER No. PA-360

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

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Location: N side of Main Street, S of SR 96,
Manns Choice, Bedford County,
Pennsylvania

Date of Construction: ca. 1892

Present Use: Vacant

Significance: Once home to numerous tanneries,
Bedford County (and its neighbor to
the east, Fulton County) contains
few remnants of this once locally
important industry. The building
that once housed the McNeal & Black
Tannery is one of the best
preserved structures of this
industry in the county.

Historian: Elaine J. Will, 1991

Project Information: The results of the study of Bedford
County were published in 1994: Kim
Wallace (ed), Bedford County and
Fulton County, Pennsylvania: An
Inventory of Historic Engineering
and Industrial Sites (Washington,
D.C.: National Park Service). The
contents of the publication were
transmitted to the Library of
Congress as individual reports.
Research notes, field photos and
copies of historic photos collected
during the project were transmitted
to the AIHP Collection, Special
Collections, Stapleton Library,
Indiana University of Pennsylvania,
Indiana, PA 15705.

The original tannery building remaining on the site is a wood-frame, two-story structure resting on a foundation of brick and concrete block. The three-by-nine-bay building has clapboard siding, a corrugated metal gable roof, and contains six-over-nine, double-hung windows. The structure features raised wooden facades on both ends. There is a two-story addition (one by seven bays) on the building's west side, alongside which is another one-story, one-by-eight-bay addition. Both additions are constructed of concrete block, have corrugated metal roofing, and contain nine-pane windows. A tall, exterior smoke stack leans slightly and is supported by guy wires.

In the yard to the west of the main buildings is a small, brick building covered by a shed roof, and the steel framework of a former structure. Across Main Street from the tannery complex there is a two-and-a-half story wood-frame, side-gable residence that was once the home of David Black. It has a wrap-around porch and has been covered with aluminum siding. To the west of this house there is a smaller one-and-a-half story, side-gable, wood-frame dwelling that was also associated with the tannery.

David M. Black and Jacob Bobletts (Boblitz) began the construction of the first tannery on this site in 1867. Two years later Bobletts retired, and James F. McNeal took his place. The steam tannery was operated by McNeal & Black until 1877, when it was purchased by Prichett, Baugh & Company, a Philadelphia firm. At this time the facility was enlarged and its leather production increased; in 1884 the tannery was capable of dressing ten thousand hides a year.

The town of Mann's Choice grew up around the tannery. Building lots were laid out near the tannery when it opened and the Mann's Choice post office was reestablished in 1867. Finished and raw hides were taken by wagon to and from Everett, the nearest railroad connection. In 1871 the railroad was extended to Mann's Choice and on the next year to Hyndman. A siding gave the tannery direct railroad access. Additional lots were laid out for the town in 1872. It was incorporated as a borough in 1887.

On July 5, 1892, the tannery was destroyed by fire, although the houses associated with the tannery did not burn. George B. and John K. White of Hyndman, Pennsylvania, purchased the land and built a larger tannery on the same site. Their tannery operated only until 1895, when financial difficulties forced it to close. The Elk Tanning Company, headquartered in Ridgway in Elk County, then purchased the tract, and the plant continued to be one of the town's leading employers. In 1906 the tannery was described as "the leading industry of the town," and was credited with contributing greatly to the town's general prosperity.

In 1926, the Mann's Choice tanning operation closed permanently. During the early 1930s, the buildings briefly housed the Mann's Choice Confectionery Company. The portion of the plant still standing was most recently occupied by the Exact Level Company, a manufacturer of precision tools that moved to Alum Bank, Pennsylvania, in 1985. The building now stands vacant.

The large house that still stands across from the tannery appears on an 1877 atlas and is identified as D. M. Black's residence; also identified on the atlas are three "tenement houses" (at least one of which remains), and an office, which is no longer extant. The houses are currently occupied.

Sources:

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- Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Department of Labor and Industry. Second Industrial Directory of Pennsylvania, 1916. Harrisburg, Pa.: State Printer, 1916.
- Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Department of Internal Affairs. Fifth Industrial Directory of Pennsylvania, 1925. Harrisburg, Pa.: State Printer, 1925.
- Kegg, Roy. "A 'Choice' Region Landmark." The Pioneer. 9 (April 1983). Bedford, Pa.: The Pioneer Historical Society of Bedford County.
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